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Critics question accuracy of book on mercenary's exploits

By William Tuohy
Los Angeles Times

LONDON - It reads like a James Bond thriller, but an author's note insists that "every incident in this book is true, and the people are all real."

Writing under the pseudonym Gayle Rivers, the author describes himself as an antiterrorist killer trained by the SAS, Britain's Special Air Service. The book, entitled "The Specialist," has been published in Britain and is now out in the United States.

On the jacket, it says that Rivers has hunted IRA terrorists in Northern Ireland, killed IRA gun-runners in Europe and the Middle East, assassinated Basque terrorist leaders in their hide-outs in France, led commando raids against Iranian oil installations,

carried out covert missions in Lebanon to help protect US Marines and led US Special Forces teams on a mission to assassinate Syrian intelligence officers.

A colorful account of derring-do, the book has generated controversy here because knowledgeable military people have seriously questioned its accuracy.

Brig. M.F. Hobbs, the British army's director of public relations, who has served in Ulster, said: "The passages in the book that refer to Northern Ireland do not appear to bear any resemblance to reality at all."

Another British officer said that to "anyone who knows how the SAS works on the inside, it rings all wrong."

A ballistics specialist, Peter Elliot, was quoted in the Sunday Times as saying: "Everything [the

book] says about firearms or ballistics is either wrong or misquoted from technical journals."

Publishers stand by author

Nevertheless, the book's British publishers, Sidgwick & Jackson, and Rivers' agent, George Greenfield of John Farquharson Ltd., are standing by Rivers.

"I have every reason to believe his account is accurate," Greenfield said. "I've checked the story with some SAS sources of my own."

According to the London Sunday Times, Gayle Rivers is the pseudonym of Raymond Brooks, the 37-year-old head of Mesa Corp., a Swiss-based arms firm that has run into financial difficulties. The newspaper said Brooks once volunteered for an

SAS reserve unit but failed to qualify for extended service.

Neither Sidgwick & Jackson, nor the American publishers, Stein & Day, will acknowledge that Gayle Rivers is Brooks.

Sol Stein, president of Stein & Day, said: "I am satisfied that Gayle Rivers is who he says he is and did what he says he did."

The American publisher suggests that British newspaper articles that raise doubts about Rivers' story are "disinformation" planted by intelligence agencies that do not want to admit to having used Rivers' services.

Parts of the book have been serialized in the London Sunday Mail, and the book has been chosen by the Military Book Society in London as its April selection.

Howard Cooley, an officer of the Military Book Society, said:

"We bought the book on the basis that it was offered. I am not in a position to judge its veracity. One has to rely on publishers all the time in making judgments like these."

According to promotion material put out by the British publishers, Rivers joined the New Zealand Special Air Force and somehow managed to get to Vietnam, where he was attached to the "US Green Berets." It was there this material says, that "he received the grounding in special warfare that was to carry through to a lifetime of special covert operations as an elite professional."

In the opening chapter, the reader finds Rivers driving his Porsche alongside Lake Geneva. The phone in the car rings: it is a US Marine Corps major calling from Beirut after the bombing of Marine headquarters there.

Rivers is summoned to Beirut and paid \$160,000 to lead a five-man Special Forces team in a raid on a Druze apartment building in West Beirut. The mission: to capture or kill three senior Syrian intelligence officers.

To carry out the operation, Rivers says, he and his associates used "mountaineering techniques to cross from one building to another, and he says they killed a dozen Druze and Syrians."

Americans familiar with US operations in Beirut question whether the US Marine Corps or the Central Intelligence Agency, both of which are said to have approved his selection, would call on a Swiss-based mercenary to lead such a raid.